

PHOENIX OP-ED, Continued

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rent for shoddy and squalor living quarters. Sure, there are cases where the city's housing codes department has found numerous violations in rental property. But, what happens when an individual destroys the property that belongs to an investor? And how does the investor recoupe his losses.

Quite frankly, someone has to provide housing for those members of our community who cannot afford to purchase a place of their own. The federal and local governments have done an outstanding job of providing affordable housing for many members of the community. Still a void does exist. Someone has to fill that void. Some people or groups might have the altruistic desire to provide housing for the remaining portion of our society. But, the reality is that only the private sector can really take up the slack.

Looking at it from a totally economic view then, investors are

attempting to maximize the return on their investments. That also means, then, that individuals want to get as much income from their investment as possible.

The picture painted by many people of the landlord, particularly in East Winston, is that of a person wanting to do little for the tenant while receiving as much as possible in rent each month. In some cases that very well could be true. But if an individual has an investment of \$25-50,000, they're going to make sure that the property doesn't lose its value over a period of time.

With the recent legal maneuvering by Legal Aid, many landlords find it difficult to even collect monthly rental payments. The situation has forced many investors to band together into a group, Forsyth County Property Owners Association, to support the rights of the rental property owner.

From an objective standpoint, the situation of the property owners

does merit consideration. Who goes out to give the property a clean bill of health and how do you monitor the amount of abuse inflicted upon property by tenants? There really is nothing in place to monitor that situation.

On the other side of the coin, why would an individual allow the property that he or she rents to become run-down?

Some landlords say that when code violations are found, the tenants believe they will not be forced to pay rent. So in some cases, they deliberately do damage to their housing units. By the same token, tenants say that landlords expect unfair rental payments for inferior units.

The answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this writing. However, we should look at the situation that results from these problems.

Do the members of the Legal Aid Society have a vested interest in the

community, particularly East Winston? Are these well-trained attorneys putting notches in their legal belts or are they genuinely concerned about the general welfare of the people they represent? Also, what type of background checks do they run on the individuals to see the kind of housing track records they have?

A quick perusal of the areas in question leaves one with a viewpoint. Examine the area on the east side of town between 21st and 25th Streets. You can't help but notice the number of units that are boarded up. These houses are empty while the city has to deal with hundreds of homeless families

Ask a real estate agent and they'll quickly offer an answer. People are afraid to invest money and time into these units when there is no guarantee they'll receive a return on their investment.

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Cameron Avenue, into another shack across from Atkins High School. But, again, you could always spot her place among the others. I marvelled at her constant battle not to keep up with the poor Joneses around her. But, the quality of her life-how she lived, not where she lived-was important to her spiritual well-being.

Urban redevelopment again chased Grandma around to 14th Street, near where Hooper's Funeral Home is now, and finally to the low-income senior citizens community on Highway 311 where she currently lives.

When I drive through some of the areas that have been developed or redeveloped in East Winston over the last 30-40 years and notice that what started out as new low-cost housing has managed to deteriorate, I have to ask whether the fault is with the landlord, be it public housing or privately-owned property, or with the tenant. I address the tenant/landlord situation because, despite programs designed to encourage affordable single-family homeownership, a disproportionate number of house-holds live in rental houses or apartments. And when it comes to who should take the blame, there is enough to go around on both sides.

The Role of the Landlord

Landlords, like any other business owners, should recognize two

things. First, rental property is an investment. Second, any physical investment must be regularly and routinely maintained. Setting up a specific program for preventative maintenance can go a long way towards minimizing tenant problems and repair or replacement costs.

Part of protecting an investment is to know as much as possible about the person using it and insist that tenants respect your property and honor responsibilities as spelled out in contractual agreement, whether formally documented or by way of an oral contract. This includes eviction of anyone who detracts from the quality of life at the rental property. This not only applies to tenants who are destructive, filthy, or abusive, it applies for those who are engaged in illegal activities. Legislation now exists that allows confiscation of property, so it only makes sense that landlords retain only those tenants who will maintain the rental property, ensuring maximum return on the investment.

The Role of the Tenant

Sometimes I have to wonder if some people enjoy living like pigs. When I look at my Grandma, she has always been a woman of modest means, but she has always insisted on cleanliness. Dirty dishes and floors, unsanitary conditions, food laying out are all conditions on

which roaches and rodents thrive. Landlords can't force people to live in houses with bathrooms so dirty that even a dog wouldn't use them. If you don't wash your dishes after every meal, you'll likely have roaches.

Picking up litter on your grounds as soon as you see it requires far less time than waiting until you're knee-deep in trash. Landlords cannot be blamed for all the negative conditions in which some tenants live. Stop grumbling about what's wrong with where you live, and ask yourself, "What can I do to help improve the conditions of my surroundings?" Then, get to work improving the quality of life in your neighborhood. Just keep in mind: while you're sitting in filth and misery waiting for the landlord to do it for you, he or she is not likely to be living in substandard housing!

Sometimes, the relationship between landlord and tenant is an unnecessary, self-fulfilling prophecy. The actions of some tenants make landlords believe tenants enjoy living in filthy, rat-infested, they get tired of replacing or repairing things that are deliberately destroyed or damaged by tenants which just contributes to the ultimate decay of the property as the cycle continues.

While major repairs are the responsibility of the landlord, there are any number of things that the

tenant can do. If you break a window or destroy a light fixture, learn to replace it. If you tear up your toilet seat, get another one. If you don't make the place where you spend a substantial part of your life comfortable for you, there is only so much that even the most magnanimous landlord is going to provide. And remember, when a landlord is required to come out and make a repair, you will feel it in your pocketbook anyway because eventually that visit and repair will be justification for a rent increase.

Even on her fixed income, my Grandma keeps doing whatever is necessary to make her rented quarters hers. I have seen her fight the roaches and rats from neighboring tenants who didn't have the same sense of pride and responsibility, and she has always come up a winner. If she can do it at age 91, there is little excuse for someone younger and abler, regardless of the concerns of day-to-day living.

Taking charge of how you live is the first step in taking responsibility of resolving your own problems and doing something for yourself. It is time for Black people to take action. If not, the problem of substandard housing will continue to haunt Black and low-income people, not just in Winston-Salem, but everywhere.